GOD'S HUMILITY
Luke 2:1-7; Philippians 2:5-11
December 16, 1979

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

It used to be my privilege to visit regularly and conduct an occasional Chapel Service at the Indiana Soldiers Home. The people who lived there were retired military persons and their spouses; many of them career officers. I loved my visits. Conversations were always lively, opinions felt deeply and expressed readily. It was almost as if they were compensating for the lifelong silence on political issues practiced by professional soldiers. I called there during the Vietnam years and as you can imagine the crusty veterans of Flanders and Normandy were not the least bit happy with the conduct or the results. I know that they are discussing the matter of the American hostages in Iran, and I am sure they are unanimous in their opinion as to the appropriate way to deal with that crisis.

I thought of the residents of the Indiana Soldiers Home this week when I was studying the New Testament lesson we have heard, from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. I thought of them because they are precisely the kind of people to whom Paul was writing. Philippi was, in fact, somewhat of a retirement center for former military officers. Philippi gained prominence in 42 B.C. as the sight of one of history's major and decisive battles. After the assassination of Julius Caesar, the armies of the conspirators, led by Brutus and Cassius, were opposed by the loyalists, Mark Anthony and Octavius. Mark Anthony and Octavius were victorious at Philippi: the victory marked the real beginning of the Roman Empire and when Octavius emerged as Head of State - the Emperor - the Senate conferred the title Caesar Augustus on him.

Octavius must have had a soft spot in his heart for the place where his dramatic rise to power began because one of the first things he did was rebuild Philippi, on the model of a miniature Rome, and populate it with his old soldiers. It was given the rank of colony. It would have had something of the character of a military base. Its mentality would have been martial. And in Philippi, a Roman citizen by the name of Paul, had planted the seeds of a Christian Church.

These are the people to whom he wrote what was to become one of the most important and certainly one of the most eloquent passages in the Bible. Philippians 2:5-11... "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself...humbled himself, became obedient..."

The old soldiers of Philippi, like the old soldiers of Indiana, would have understood the business about obedience unto death. That is the military code. It was the self-emptying, the humility, the conscious renunciation of power which they would have tripped on, and which was so opposite from everything they had lived by. A soldier understands power. You don't renounce it, you use it on your enemy. You don't empty yourself: you protect and extend yourself at the expense of your opponent. Nowhere does the Gospel of Jesus Christ stand in such sharp contrast to the world as in the passage written, perhaps for the old soldiers of Philippi. Self-emptying - humility are here defined as characteristics of the new life in Christ, and that - even at Christmas, is radically different

The world, after all, operates largely on a power basis. It always has. The fundamental religious question asked by every generation since the beginning of time has to do with power; namely, if God is all powerful, why do His people suffer? We ask that question every time a good and dear friend, a loyal church member, a generous human being is struck down prematurely. Why? Why does God let it happen? Why do God's enemies prosper and His friends suffer? Why doesn't God do something?

No one ever asked that question more urgently than the ancient Jews at the time of their exile in Babylon. In the beginning they perceived their God in the same terms

as their neighbors. Tribal deities gave power to their people: the more powerful the tribe or nation, the more powerful the deity. Prosperity, economic strength and military conquests, even the number of concubines enjoyed by the King were all seen as evidence of God's power and glory. In brief, God was established by the power and strength of those who claimed His name. During the reigns of Kings like David, Solomon and Uzziah it was easy to believe that the God of Israel was Lord of all, and His people chosen from among the whole human race. But it didn't last long: the system began to unravel in a civil war, a split into two nations, questionable alliances, finally invasion and conquest. In 587 Jerusalem was vanquished and Solomon's Temple, the very sign of God's power and presence, was leveled and the population deported.

Paul Tournier observes: "For a nation which has so totally identified its destiny with the power of Jahwah, it is much more than a military defeat, it is a religious calamity, the collapse of the very foundation of its faith. Having for so long proved God by the success of those who served him they began to doubt him in the face of this complete catastrophe. Where is God's power?" (The Violence Within, p.107).

There it is - the age old predicament of faith. Why the awful silence of God? Why do the innocent suffer? Why not peace and harmony instead of war and suffering? A moment of pure revelation and one of the turning points in the history of religious thought, came when a prophet, left behind in Judah, wrote to the exiles in Babylon to the effect that God himself suffers with them, that He identifies with them, that He becomes weak for their sakes, that He chooses humility.

The prophet used an image of a suffering servant and his words are among the most poignant in all the language of religion. We read some of them responsively:

> "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted
> yet he opened not his mouth:
> like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
> and like sheep that before its shearers is dumb,
> so he opened not his mouth."

What an incredible way to be talking about God. What a vast contrast between that and the brazen and vulgar religions of the world with their petty tyrant gods flexing their muscles and commanding obeisance at the threat of death. We have not always understood it, but God's chosen humility has been the essential part of our tradition since that time long ago.

Jesus knew about the words of the prophet. He seems to have understood His mission in life in terms of Isaiah's description of God's suffering servant. The motif of self-emptying, humility and the total renunication of power is the most consistent in His life. He advised His followers, for instance, to become like little children. He told them that the man who exalts himself will be humbled. He said that in His Kingdom the first will be last and the last first. He suggested that the way to receive life was to lose it, and the guaranteed way to lose it was to try to grasp it. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the time of His arrest He said it plainly - "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father who would promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to my defense?", and then allowed himself to be taken away by the guards.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a radical alternative to the use of power which characterizes the world. Let's think about that for a moment. We have all experienced the strange and compelling way in which power translates itself into violence. A normally placid and peace loving person can, and often does, become aggressive, belligerent, pushy and violent at the wheel of a several hundred horsepower automobile, Child abuse, one of the truly alarming problems in our culture is a pure example of power

becoming violence, encouraged by the degree of violence the culture both allows and celebrates. But far short of physical abuse, every parent knows how easy it is, because of inherent power, to do verbal and emotional violence to one's children. It took me a long time to come to terms with it, but I am beginning to see that power always has the potential of violence within it. Tournier, who has written an excellent book on the subject helped me to see that. He writes: "The more powerful we are, the greater the constraint, open or hidden, which we exercise upon others, and the more we thus provoke them to violent reactions. (ob.cit., p.114). That is a helpful insight as we think about and are astonished by the intense hatred some of the Iranian people seem to feel toward us.

One of the truly disturbing assertions in Tournier's book which he documents thoroughly is that "power confers impunity on violence". From Julius Caesar on down, powerful men have rationalized their own violence. "If you are powerful, your violence can escape all retribution. Power is secured by violence, and violence is justified by power." (Ob.cit., p.115).

You don't have to look far for the proof of that particular pudding. The history of Christianity has been an object lesson in the corruption of power. Many scholars contend that the very worst thing ever to happen to the church was its becoming the State religion of Rome by edict of the Emperor Constantine. Certainly its worst mistakes have been committed at the height of its secular power. The verbal violence of a religious leader in modern Iran has been preceeded by other similar abuses against human freedom and dignity - on the part of Christian leaders.

Yet we continue to be fascinated with power. Institutionally, we evaluate the effectiveness of the church on the basis of its size, wealth and strength. Big - even in churches - is beautiful. And we have made personal power into a kind of religious guest. EST, Assertiveness Training, are important phenomena today. We are encouraged to flex our muscles, push our weight around, take nothing from anyone and to insist, as a matter of principle, that we have the right to have things our way. My, I'm weary of self-assertiveness. I appreciate the psychologial reality fact that many of us could stand a little more self-esteem, but we have turned the search into an obsession, the result of which has become the "Me Generation". It all came home to me in one of those unexpected, aprochryphal encounters recently. I was waiting a bit impatiently at an intersection while the driver of the car in front of me conducted an animated conversation with several young ladies in a van. It went on for some time. Finally, I suggested that they might terminate the conversation and allow me to proceed by blowing my horn. The driver in front of me put his car in gear and pulled ahead. The girls in the van, however, pulled directly beside me, the driver looked me in the eye, made the one universally recognized obscene gesture not two feet from my face, and in the richest Anglo-Saxon combination of four letter words I had heard for some time gave me a concise analysis of my personality, looks and ancestry. I was totally surprised - stunned - then angry, and finally very sad. We have used self-assertiveness as a socially accepted excuse for unvarnished adolescent selfishness. We have used the psychologically legitimate need for self-esteem as an excuse to bulldoze anyone who stands in our way. Friedrich Nietzsche, a philosopher who loathed the Christian faith for its emphasis on humility, called it the triumph of smallness and weakness and offered instead a celebration of strength and power which Nazi theoreticians eagerly used to give legitimacy to their Master-race ideologies. We have, in this culture - at this time - begun to behave in a way Nietzsche would have approved. Power is the name of the game.

We buy books which advise how to "Win Through Intimidation". We even arrange our office furniture so that the boss sits slightly higher than anyone else. But even though it is our current obsession - integrity demands the observation that power does not work. It is one of the grandest of delusions: perhaps the biggest lie of all - that might makes right, or that it even works over the long run.

Power can change behavior but it cannot convert one single mind. Parents discover that almost daily with their children. A child can be forced to behave in a certain way out of fear. But that will not translate into respect, or more importantly, into self conscious responsible behavior unless there is something more than power involved. The cause of Jesus Christ was not advanced when the church controlled the minds of men and women, or when conversions were effected by force. In romance, we discover that love can never use power to work its will, for if it does, it will negate itself out and remain empty and alone. Power - our greatest temptation - simply doesn't work...

In fact, there is a curious way in which real power never resorts to force, but is expressed in restraint. It is difficult to resist the temptation but thus far the power of our nation has been eloquently expressed in what we have not done in Iran. The philosopher Georges Gusdorf observed that, "despite appearances violence is more a sign of weakness than of strength...Violence is the opposite of strength, for the energy it brings to bear is the energy of despair...The stronger one is, the less one needs to show one's strength." (Tournier, ibid. p.11).

Power doesn't work. Love works. Strong love which never coerces, never forces, is never violent. When God wanted to give the gift of salvation to His creation He had, one must assume, any number of alternatives. When He wanted to show people how to live fully joyfully, eternally, He could have made it mandatory. But it wouldn't have worked that way. God, in infinite wisdom, chose to become humble...

Sitting in prison, waiting for his execution by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had plenty of time to think about God's power in the context of real, worldly, military power. And he wrote: "God allows himself to be edged out of the world and unto a cross. God is weak and powerless in the world and that is exactly the way in which he can be with us and help us." (Letters and Papers from Prison, p.164).

And so He came among us as a baby. Years later St. Paul would describe it as a process of self-emptying, of self-giving so complete that He was obedient unto death. But for now, as we near the date, we must deal with the incredible miracle of the birth. There is no more descriptive picture of vulnerability and humility than that. There is nothing less powerful than a new born. Has it been long since you held one in your arms? Can you remember the feeling: the slight uneasiness because of the smallness, the total dependency and vulnerability? There is absolutely no threat of harm in holding a baby. God, I believe chose that way to be known among us. Not in thunder and lightning - people have been seeing their gods in that way since the beginning of time - but in a baby's cry: not in the majesty of a great cathedral - people have always installed their deities in grand architectural monuments - but in the utter humility of an infant's birth.

God's humility: He chose it that way because it is the only way we would be convinced ultimately. Yet, sometimes we miss it. Sometimes in the midst of tinsel and gifts, in the midst of the very customs with which we hope to observe it, we miss its humble beauty.

And so, be reminded today. Be reminded in simple wrods written by a Scottish poet:

"They all were looking for a king
To slay their foes and lift them high,
Thou cam'st, a little baby thing
That made a woman cry." (George MacDonald). Amen.

O God, in the middle of all the busyness, the music and activity and celebrating, help us, once again, to know the humility of the birth of your Son. O God, forgive us for idolizing power. Help us to see that the only real power is in love. Our Father, we are grateful for this blessed season: grace it with Your presence: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.